

Building Blocks of Faith: Sin
I John 1:8-2:2; Romans 3:21-24
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We continue our sermon series on “The Building Blocks of Faith” today as we talk about sin and salvation. I wish we could just talk about salvation. That would probably make this a much more comfortable sermon to preach. But you can’t have the wonderful experience of stepping out of the shower all fresh and clean until you realize that you need the shower in the first place, so in order for us to get to the good news of salvation, we have to talk about sin.

For some reason, we don’t like to talk about sin much. It has become a bad word in our society. I was once told by a minister who was reading over one of my sermons that I shouldn’t use the word “sinfulness,” that it was too negative. She suggested I used “brokenness” or “shortcomings.” That’s like the doctor who told me he didn’t like to tell family members that a loved one had died; he said he told them they had “transitioned.” But Paul doesn’t say that all suffer from brokenness and have fallen short of the glory of God; he says all have sinned.

In the book of James, chapter 5, the author says it’s important that we confess our sins to each other and pray for forgiveness. So I thought today would be a good time for all of us to stand up and confess our sins to each other. ____, why don’t you start?

That’s a scary thought, huh? What would happen if we dared to confess our sins to each other? Someone might find out we’re not perfect! Someone might find out we’re not the good person that everyone thinks we are! We’d be kicked out of church, our name will be mentioned in hushed tones: “Remember, Kory?” “Oh yeah, can you believe it? I thought he was such a nice guy, who would have guessed he was really a sinner!”

Paul spends the first three chapters in Romans making one simple point that we must all acknowledge: we are all sinners. We have all sinned. Plain and simple. The Bible doesn’t make distinctions on types of sin. That’s hard for some of us to accept. There’s no list in the Bible that says murder is a really big sin but telling a lie is only a little sin. In God’s eyes, they are all sins, and no sin is less sinful than any others. Our human laws make these kinds of distinctions, but God doesn’t. The Bible doesn’t focus on how we’ve sinned, but that we have sinned, and that we can’t save ourselves from our sin.

I think one of the reasons we shy away from talking about sin is that it implies we are bad people. That word sounds so judgmental, doesn’t it? SINNER! But we’re not bad people. We’ve convinced ourselves that most human beings are essentially good, including ourselves. And if we just do good and treat people well and say “Please” and “Thank you” and pay our taxes on time, we’ll go to Heaven.

I agree that we are good people. There’s not a bad person here today that I know of. But if we’re going to believe John and Paul, the biblical authors, not the Beatles, then our goodness isn’t in question here. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves. All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.

Acknowledging our sinfulness is fundamental to our understanding of Christianity. We have to acknowledge the fact that we are sinners in order for us to accept Jesus as our Savior; otherwise, what’s he saving us from? Calling someone a sinner is not a judgmental statement; it is asserting the reality of their existence. Naming

the fact that we have all sinned is an important step toward salvation, because sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed.

What is sin? I ran across a lot of definitions in my study this week. But I agree most with one of my professors, Clark Williamson, who said sin is the refusal of the creature to acknowledge the creator and to love the neighbor. Sin is anything that separates us from God and from each other.

This can be things we do (sins of commission), or things we should do but don't (sins of omission). James, who had a lot to say about sin, says in chapter 4, "Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." Part of acknowledging our sinfulness is not only admitting what we've done, but admitting what we've left undone.

There's been a lot of argument down through the centuries over the source of sin. Where does it come from? Why are we all sinful? The concept of original sin, passed down by Augustine, says that when Adam and Eve took a bite of the forbidden fruit, which was the very first sin, they infected all humankind with sin, and that everyone born after them was born a sinner.

I don't agree with this. I simply can't look at my four-month-old daughter and say she's a sinner. There's nothing she has yet done that would count as a sin. This notion of original sin was one of the impetuses for infant baptism. The Church believed babies had to be baptized right away so this inherent sinfulness could be washed out of them.

I don't believe we are born sinners, but I do agree with Paul in Romans when he says we all have a sinful nature within us. The Hebrew word is "yetzer harah," the evil urge. That makes more sense to me, and certainly fits my experience. Sin is not an inherent flaw in our design, but a natural human vulnerability, something we all are susceptible to and eventually succumb to. We're all like Mae West, who once said, "I generally avoid temptation, unless I can't resist it!"

Sometimes, we even sin before we know it is happening. Growing up, I can remember some of my older relatives telling racial jokes and using derogatory names for African-Americans. I didn't know any better, so I'd repeat these jokes at school to my friends, and they'd tell them to their friends. I learned to sin before I even knew I was sinning. Sin is a force at work within us and around us, and we simply are not powerful enough to resist it.

But no one likes to admit they have sinned, because it brings on feelings of shame and guilt. It's easier to ignore the fact that we've fallen short of the glory of God. A missionary was placed in a remote African village and began to teach the natives about sin. He told them they were all sinners, and if they didn't not believe in God they would go to Hell. One day a native asked the missionary, "If I did not know about my sinfulness and about God, would I still go to Hell?" The missionary said, "No, you wouldn't if you didn't know about it." The native smacked the missionary upside the head and said, "Then why did you tell me?"

But being made aware of our sinfulness helps us see the need for God. Martin Luther said, "The recognition of sin is the beginning of salvation." Recognizing our sins means admitting we have fallen short, that we are not fully the person God has called us to be. Remember, sin is not a flaw in our design. Sinfulness is not our essence. We were not created to be sinful. God intended us for better things.

That's where salvation comes in. Salvation and "being saved" are not common words in the Disciples vocabulary. I remember one time on the playground a kid came up

to me and asked me if I was saved. I said, "From what?" He said, "I don't know, I just know it's important." He's right, it is important. But what does it mean to be saved?

Paul says in Romans 6 that "the wages of sin is death", I mean, "Death." Paul means spiritual death, or life apart from God. There are dire consequences for falling short of God's glory. But Christ, our Savior, has taken those consequences upon himself, taken it all the way to the cross, and when he died there, they died along with him. We are all guilty of sinning, and yet, despite the evidence, God the Judge has declared us all innocent. It's a gift that cannot be understated: we have been saved from a life apart from God, because through Christ we can come to God for forgiveness and receive God's grace and mercy.

So how do we do that? How do we receive salvation? I again turn to Paul, who says in Romans 1, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Likewise, Jesus says at the end of Mark, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." We are saved through the humble acknowledgement of our need to be saved, and through our faith in Jesus Christ as the one who saves us.

But I believe we are not only saved from something, but we are also saved for something. We are saved so that we can be about God's work in this world. The beauty of salvation is that God loves us for who we are, but God doesn't want us to stay there. Through our faith, not only are we saved, we are blessed, we are anointed with the Spirit to do God's work in this world. That's why salvation always results in a changed life: the inner transformation should always result in an outward transformation. The joy of being saved by Christ should bubble over into our everyday actions, as we use our Spirit-given gifts to serve God.

Does our salvation mean we'll never sin again? No. We are still human, and we still have the same vulnerabilities and face the same temptations. But we are no longer alone in our battle against sin. I don't believe God is interested in what we've done or how many times we've done it. What God cares about is that we acknowledge our sinfulness, that we ask for forgiveness, and that we strive to live as a changed person, no longer defined by our sinfulness, but defined by our faith and by God's grace at work within us.

We are sinners, and we have been saved from our sins. But we have been saved for something much greater than we could ever imagine. We have been saved to be a servant of Jesus Christ. Wow. Thanks be to God.